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ABSTRACT

One goal of a longitudinal study of stepfamilies, divorced maternal custody families, and nondivorced families was to assess the quality and functioning of the sibling relationship and to determine the conditions under which sibling relationships become more cohesive or more competitive during family transitions. Relationships between the target child, who was between 9 and 13 years of age at the beginning of the 2.5 year study, and a target sibling within 5 years of the target child's age were assessed through interviews with the mother, father, and target child using an expanded version of Schaefer and Edgerton's Sibling Inventory of Behavior, and through behavioral observation of the sibling pair in a play situation, a family problem-solving situation, and at the dinner table. The results revealed that, at least according to family members, boys in remarried families exhibited far more negative behavior and offered much less support to their siblings than any other group. Girls in remarried families did not appear to differ from girls in other family groups, and may have even offered increased support to their siblings over the course of the first year of adjustment to remarriage. Over time, observed interactions of siblings took on a more negative quality for children in remarried families. Some of these changes may have been reflective of developmental change in sibling relations as the children entered adolescence. (NB)

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COMPETITION AND COHESION IN SIBLING RELATIONS DURING THE ADAPTATION TO REMARRIAGE

EDWARD R. ANDERSON
ALYSON M. NORTH

Knowledge of the quality and functioning of the sibling relationship may be critical for understanding the adaptation of children to family transitions. It could be argued, for example, that during times of crisis, sibling relationships become more cohesive as children bond together for mutual support during the stressful period of the transition. Particularly in situations such as divorce or remarriage where the crisis is precipitated by adults, children may question the reliability of adults as a source of stability and support and turn to each other for solace. Conversely, children in the same family during times of crisis may compete for scarce resources as they attempt to cope with the reorganization of the family environment.

The particular adaptational response of siblings to their parent's marital transitions is likely to vary, however, across children of different sexes, ages, differences in spacing of the two children, and the quality of other relationships in the family. Moreover, in this study, characteristics of the sibling relationship are expected to change across time both as a function of the entry into adolescence, and as a function of the adjustment to remarriage. Therefore, a more appropriate inquiry would be to describe the conditions under which siblings relations become more cohesive or more competitive during these transitions.

Three-fourths of the children in this study had a brother or

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sister within five years of age who was selected to be the target sibling. The sibling relationship was assessed through interviews with the mother, father, and target child using an expanded version of Schaefer and Edgerton's Sibling Inventory of Behavior, and through behavioral observation of the sibling pair in a play situation, a family problem-solving situation, and at the dinner table. The interview instrument is a 48-item questionnaire which measures behavior of the target child directed toward the target sibling on six dimensions. Cronbach alphas for these scales are presented in Table 1. <1> Behavioral measures and child reports of the interview measure are not available for the third wave of divorced families, although mother's reports are available, as is the complete set for remarried and nondivorced families.

The interview measure of rivalry refers to negative behaviors such as "jealous," "takes advantage of," "competitive," and "resents."

Aggression is active dislike, such as "gets angry," "hurts feelings," and "has physical fights."

Avoidance includes "embarrassment," "staying away from," "acts ashamed of" sibling.

The dimension of companionship measures closeness, positive involvement, acceptance of sibling as a playmate, and having similar interests.

Empathy is emotional support, encouragement, showing sympathy, and concern.

Finally, directiveness assesses parental roles such as

teaching, helping sibling adjust to new situations, and babysitting.

Agreement across raters for these scales was in general quite good, as shown by the Pearson correlations in Table 2. <2>

Interview data thus involves the behavior of the target child toward his or her sibling closest in age. Observational data, in contrast, includes ratings for both the target child and the target sibling. A description of the observational constructs is presented in Table 3. <3>

In this paper, results describing "children" refer to the target children in the study, while "siblings" refers to the behavior of the target siblings. For the results that follow, it must be kept in mind that whereas target children in this study ranged in age from 9 to 13 years at the first wave, target siblings ranged in age from 4 to 17. Limited sample size precludes the possibility of determining interactive effects of age, gender, and spacing.

Effects of family context

<4> Similar to parent-child relationships in this study, children in stepfamilies are more often viewed by family members as behaving more negatively toward their siblings than children in other family groups, and these differences are particularly pronounced for boys. There are few consistent overall sex differences in sibling relationships across this age period, however, sex differences are marked for children in remarried families, at least according to the mothers. In general, boys in remarried families are perceived by their mothers to be more

negative in their relations with their siblings compared to any other group. Conversely, looking at supportive behaviors, <5> remarried mothers rate boys lower than mothers in other groups. Similar patterns appear in the response of fathers on the interview measure. By far the most consistent and reliable difference emerging in the interview ratings of parents describes boys in remarried families as the most negative group throughout the study. A comparison of the consistency in reports of family members is shown in the next figure <6> for the scale of companionship. Boys in remarried families similarly rate themselves lower than nondivorced boys in supportive behaviors across all waves of the study.

Although few family type differences exist for girls, girls in stepfamilies report significant improvement over time compared to girls in other groups, and the reports of mothers and fathers support this trend to some degree. As displayed in the next figure, <7> girls in stepfamilies report improved relations, as indicated by increased empathy and companionship and decreased avoidance over the course of the first year. Thus, at least for girls, we find evidence of marked adjustment in sibling relationships at the second wave, which appear to decline by the end of the following year.

Results from the observational data paint a somewhat different picture of sibling relationships. The next figure <8> presents means for observer ratings of general prosocial and antisocial behavior across all sibling interactions. These patterns are representative of other behavioral rating scales.

In wave one, children from divorced homes displayed more hostility, were less assertive, less prosocial, and more coercive toward their siblings than children in other family groups, and these differences persisted at the second wave. Although fewer differences emerged in the observational measures when comparing nondivorced and remarried families, when they did occur, children in stepfamilies were rated more negatively than were children in nondivorced families, and this becomes more evident over time. On the sibling measures, as in most measures in this study, when differences between nondivorced and divorced and remarried families occur, they are almost always in the direction of more positive adjustment and family functioning in the nondivorced families, and more disrupted or pathogenic functioning in the nontraditional families.

Thus, it appears that, at least according to family members, boys in remarried families exhibit far more negative behavior and offer much less support to their siblings than any other group. Girls in remarried families do not differ from girls in other family groups, and in fact, there is some suggestion that they offer increased support to their siblings over the course of the first year of adjustment. When we observe siblings interacting together, however, children in divorced families compared to other groups appear more negative, particularly boys, while children in remarried families initially look no different from children in nondivorced families. Over time, however, observed interactions of siblings take on a more negative quality for children in remarried families. Some of these changes may be

reflective of developmental change in sibling relations as these children enter adolescence.

Developmental changes

In fact, age of the child was an important variable for determining the quality of the sibling relationship. Across family type, sibling relations for most children become increasingly distant across the age period in this study. The effect is most marked for boys in nondivorced homes. In the interview, levels of companionship decline across the three waves for these boys according to all raters on the interview assessment. This decline is similar not only for empathy and directiveness, but also aggression, suggesting disengagement in both positive and negative dimensions. Significant increases across time are noted in the parental reports of avoidance, however, the self-reports of boys, in contrast, show decreasing avoidance across waves.

Furthermore, these age changes interact with age of the sibling. Children who had an older sibling were rated lower in directiveness, rivalry, companionship, aggression, and embarrassment. In contrast, when children have younger siblings, the children were rated higher on involvement and directiveness, and at later waves are rated higher on embarrassment, rivalry, and aggression. Thus, as a group, children disengage from their siblings over time, but may become more negative to younger siblings.

When children are forced to interact together in problem-solving sessions and can't disengage, sibling interactions may be

more actively negative. Older children were observed to generate more conflict, were less warm, and in more negative moods than were younger children when interacting with their siblings. Similarly, prosocial behavior decreases significantly compared to the first wave, and in fact, wave two appeared to be the lowest point for involved, prosocial behavior, when children were on average 12 1/2 years old. Thus, when children enter adolescence, according to interview reports, there appears to be a withdrawal of emotional support and companionship, and an increase of embarrassment and avoidance. When children are required to interact together with their siblings, this distancing appears to be translated into increased hostility. This is especially true of children whose siblings are younger. When children have younger siblings, they are observed to be more hostile, coercive, and antisocial. At later waves, topics of disagreement move away from television viewing to issues of privacy such as entering the child's room without permission. In addition, we often observe younger siblings teasing older children about their heterosexual relations, to which the older children respond with comments such as, "you're so immature!"

Cluster analyses

To provide a more integrated picture of sibling relations, separate cluster analysees were performed on the interview and observational data. Three clusters were identified from the interview data that clearly separated groups of siblings from one another. Comparable clusters emerged from both interview and behavioral sources, and at each of the three waves. An example

of the cluster categories for the interview measures is presented in the next Figure <9> describing the relative position of each cluster to the grand mean for each interview scale. Children in the first cluster are above the grand mean for all positive scales and below the grand mean for almost all negative scales. Since the relative position of the three ratings of directiveness distinguishes these children from the third group, this cluster indicates a warm, involved, but asymmetric relationship on the part of the target child, and are labeled involved, directive.

The second cluster is clearly the most hostile group. The means for the scales of aggression are greater than one standard deviation from the grand mean for the sample, and the means for the supportive dimensions are well below the grand mean. The are labeled hostile, aggressive.

Finally, the third group are at or above the grand mean on companionship and empathy, but below the mean on directiveness. These children are moderately warm and not overly hostile toward their siblings, but tend not to give them much guidance or dominate over them. These children are involved, but non-directive. These scores indicate only the behavior of the target child toward the sibling, and not the quality of the dyad.

Age covariates

When we examined the differences in age for these clusters of children, we found no effect for age of the child, but very large effects for age of the sibling. As expected, children in the involved, directive cluster had siblings with the youngest average age, and children in the involved, non-directive cluster

had siblings with the oldest average age. Moreover, the spacing of the two siblings contributed to differences in cluster membership. The target child in the involved, directive cluster was on average between 2 and 2 1/2 years older than the target sibling. Children in the non-directive cluster were on average younger than their target sibling. Finally, in the hostile, aggressive cluster, the mean age difference between siblings was always within 1 year.

Although the clusters identified through behavioral observations appear to be similar, they may in fact represent different dynamics, as discussed previously. There is only modest overlap between children identified in a particular cluster across data sources. In the next Figure, <10> the means for each cluster identified through observational data are presented. Again, there appears to be a warm, directive relationship, as indicated by the higher mean on power, in which the target child is typically older than the target sibling. In contrast to the interview clusters, the children observed to be hostile are on average 1 1/2 years older than their siblings. In enforced togetherness in observational situations, if the sibling is much younger than the target child, the older target child is typically identified as hostile. Finally, the non-directive sibling relations typically include children who are within one year of age. Thus, enforced togetherness between sibling pairs in interaction sessions may be associated with very different effects of age spacing.

Effects of family status on cluster membership

Using clusters obtained from the interview, as shown in the next table, <11> two-thirds of the children in stepfamilies fall into the hostile cluster. Only 5 children in remarried families were identified as involved, directive at the first wave. Within family type, children in both divorced and nondivorced families are more equally distributed across cluster categories than are children in stepfamilies. Thus, for nondivorced families, hostile sibling relations are not uncommon, however, for stepfamilies, involved, supportive relationships are rare.

Divorced girls are more likely than divorced boys to be included in the involved directive cluster at the first wave, but the differences between boys and girls in divorced families diminish by the second wave. As in other areas of this study, it appears that boys in divorced homes still require some adjusting even 4 1/2 years after divorce.

Family status interacts with age to determine cluster membership, as shown in the next table. <12> For divorced and nondivorced families, if the child is much older than the sibling, he or she is most often identified as highly involved. For nondivorced families , if the child is much younger than the sibling, the child is identified as involved, but low on directiveness. Non-directive relationships, however, also included many siblings within two years of age. For the divorced families, children younger than their siblings were equally likely to be the hostile cluster as the involved, non-directive cluster.

Differences in age did not play a similar role, however, in

determining cluster membership for children in remarried families. Children in remarried families did not support their younger siblings. Furthermore, when children in remarried families were close in age, they were often in the hostile group, especially at the first wave.

Relationship to child outcome

We next compared the behavior directed toward siblings to general behavior in other settings. Children in the involved directive cluster exhibit less negative, externalizing, acting-out behavior than any other group. As shown in the next figure, <13> this is true of not only composite parental and child reports, but also of teacher's reports of externalizing behavior. This occurs in spite of the fact that the teacher would presumably be less affected by direct observation of the child's behavior toward a sibling. Moreover, children identified as highly involved and highly directive with their sibling were the most socially competent of the three groups. It may be that children who are involved in caretaking roles learn socially competent behavior which counteracts vulnerability to negative outcome. However, these relationships appear to shift during adolescence and the caretaking roles which previously were supportive may in fact lead to adverse interactions at this age as children relieve themselves of family responsibilities. Moreover, it appears that negative sibling relationships are deleterious for child outcome regardless of family situation. The experience of family transitions may make the child more likely to be involved in such a relationship. The common

occurrence of hostile sibling relations for remarried families, and the rare occurrence of supportive relations, even for older children with a younger sibling, may make them more likely to exhibit negative behavior. As suggested by the observational data, when compounded with the entry into adolescence, which is associated with more distant sibling relations, interactions between siblings in remarried families may be even more actively negative.

CRONBACH ALPHAS AND ITEMS FOR SIBLING SCALES

RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
RIVALRY	86	80	81	89	85	89	61	61	74

pushes sibling around
tattles on sibling
jealous of sibling
nosey, has to know everything about sibling
takes advantage of sibling
blames sibling when something goes wrong
very competitive against sibling
resents sibling

RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
AGGRESSION	87	88	90	88	86	90	77	85	82

teases or annoys sibling
gets angry with sibling
fusses and argues with sibling
says unkind things to sibling
hurts siblings feelings
complains about the trouble sibling makes
has physical fights with sibling

RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
AVOIDANCE	79	84	83	80	78	88	78	81	75

embarassed to be with sibling in public
stays away from sibling if possible
acts ashamed of sibling
frowns or pouts when with sibling
avoids being seen with sibling
prefers to be alone than play with sibling

	RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
	WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
COMPANIONSHIP		90	92	92	90	91	93	90	91	86

shows or tells interesting things
accepts sibling as a playmate
gets ideas for things to do together
has fun at home with sibling
helps sibling in any way possible
does things to please sibling
treats sibling as a good friend
makes plans that include sibling
shares secrets with sibling
cooperates with sibling
knows sibling well, how sibling feels or thinks
relys on sibling
has same beliefs, ideas about the world as sibling
likes to imitate sibling
has same interests as sibling

	RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
	WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
EMPATHY		84	83	88	83	88	89	81	85	64

pleased by progress sibling makes
wants sibling to succeed
shows sympathy when things are hard for sibling
concerned for sibling welfare and happiness
comforts sibling when unhappy or upset

	RATER	MOTHER			FATHER			CHILD		
	WAVE	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
DIRECTIVENESS		81	81	79	76	76	74	64	60	64

teaches sibling new skills
helps sibling adjust to new situations
babysits and cares for sibling
teaches sibling how to behave

OBSERVATIONAL RATINGS FOR SIBLING INTERACTIONS

NEGATIVITY

- HOSTILITY
- COERCION
- TRANSACTIONAL CONFLICT

POSITIVITY

- WARMTH
- ASSERTIVENESS
- COMMUNICATION
- SELF-DISCLOSURE

INTRAVERSION

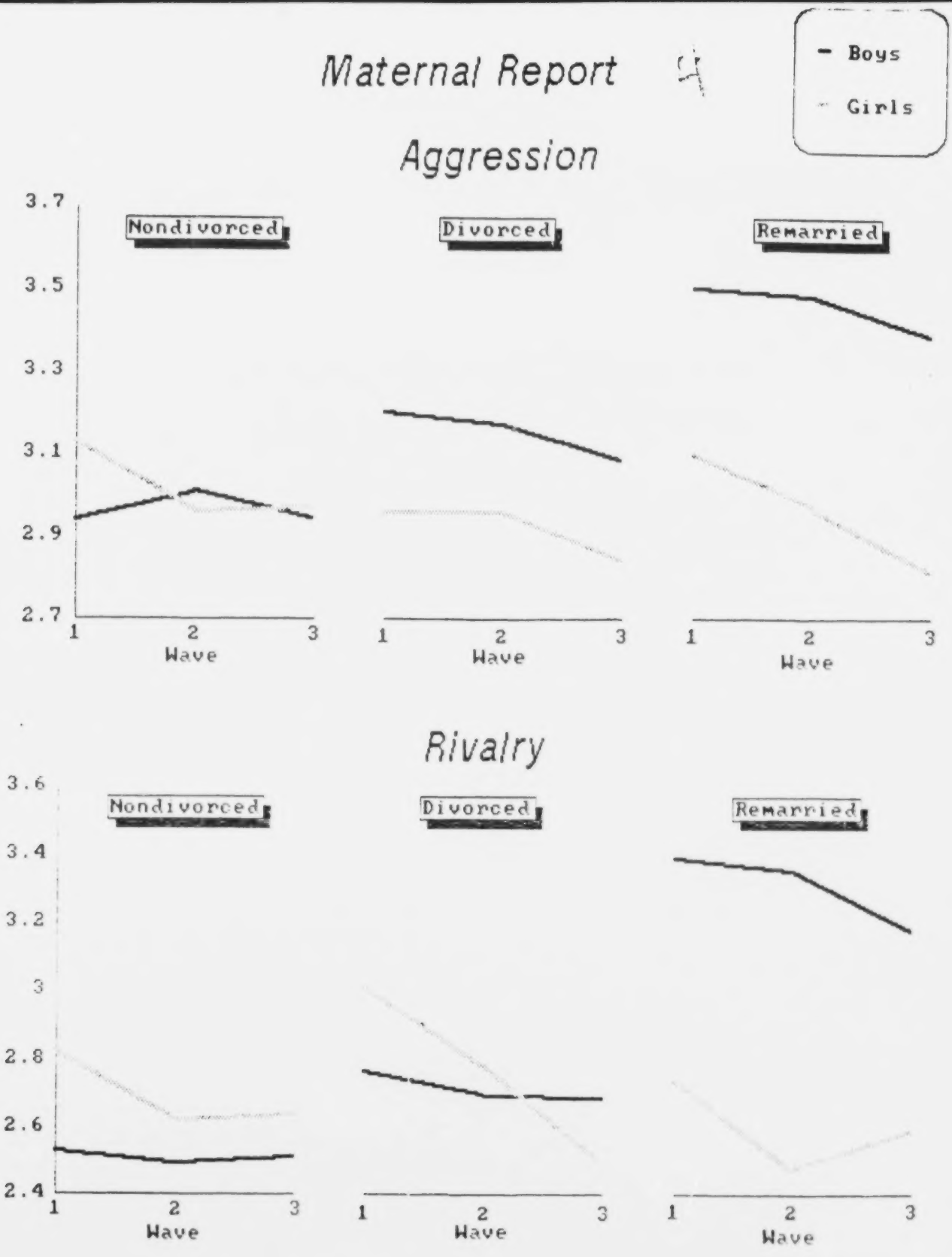
- MOOD
- SHY-WITHDRAWN

GENERAL

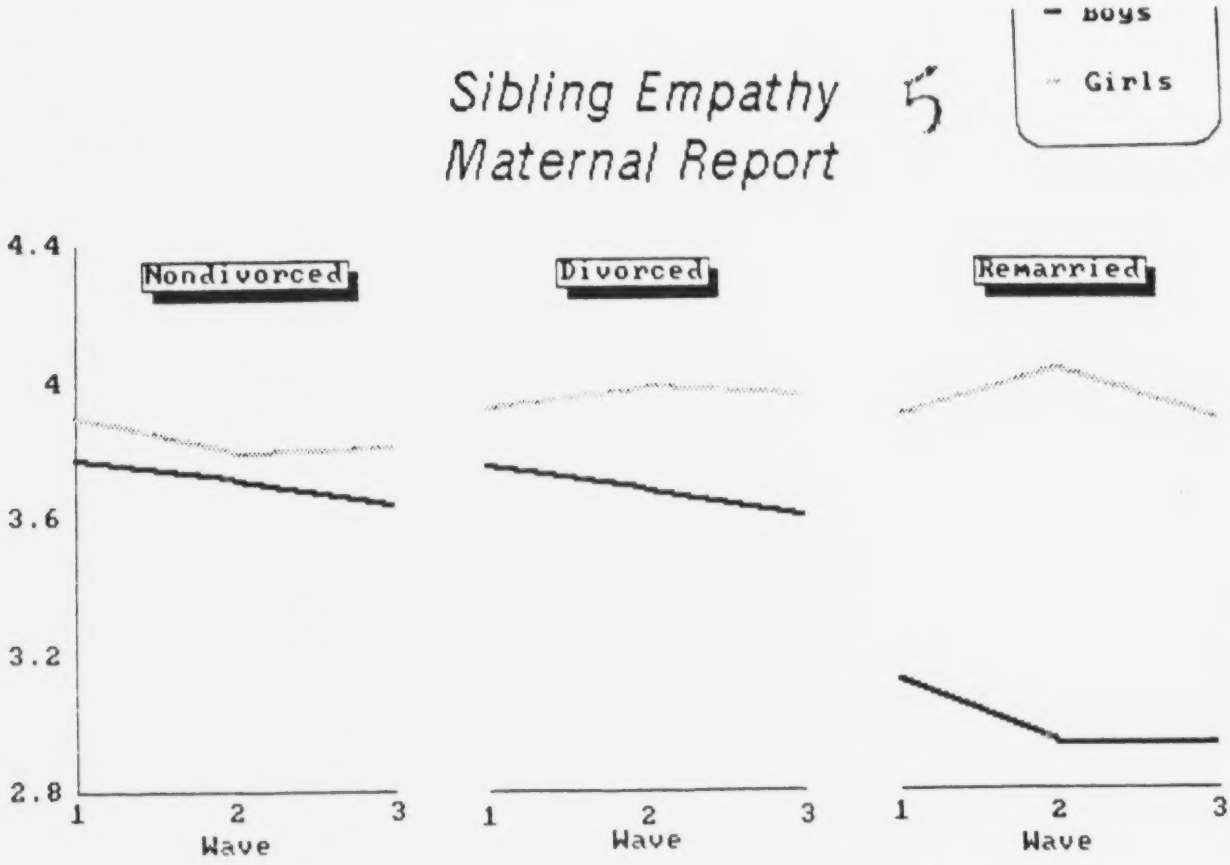
- ANTISOCIAL
- PROSOCIAL

PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RATERS
FOR SIX DIMENSIONS OF SIBLING RELATIONS

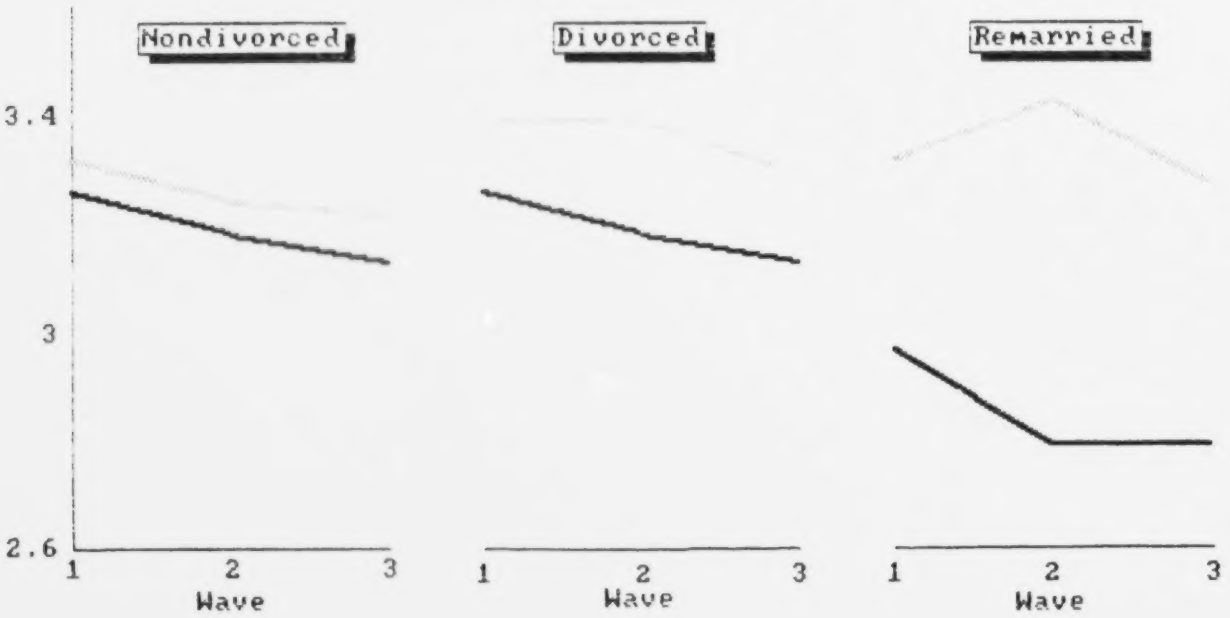
	MOTHER FATHER	MOTHER CHILD	FATHER CHILD
WAVE 1			
COMPANIONSHIP	49	50	42
EMPATHY	49	41	40
DIRECTIVENESS	63	58	51
AVOIDANCE	24	32	32
AGGRESSION	52	26	34
RIVALRY	62	22	26
WAVE 2			
COMPANIONSHIP	57	49	52
EMPATHY	49	30	44
DIRECTIVENESS	57	65	52
AVOIDANCE	39	36	36
AGGRESSION	58	38	36
RIVALRY	53	23	25
WAVE 3			
COMPANIONSHIP	61	66	53
EMPATHY	56	56	50
DIRECTIVENESS	62	68	50
AVOIDANCE	48	36	37
AGGRESSION	64	49	44
RIVALRY	52	30	26

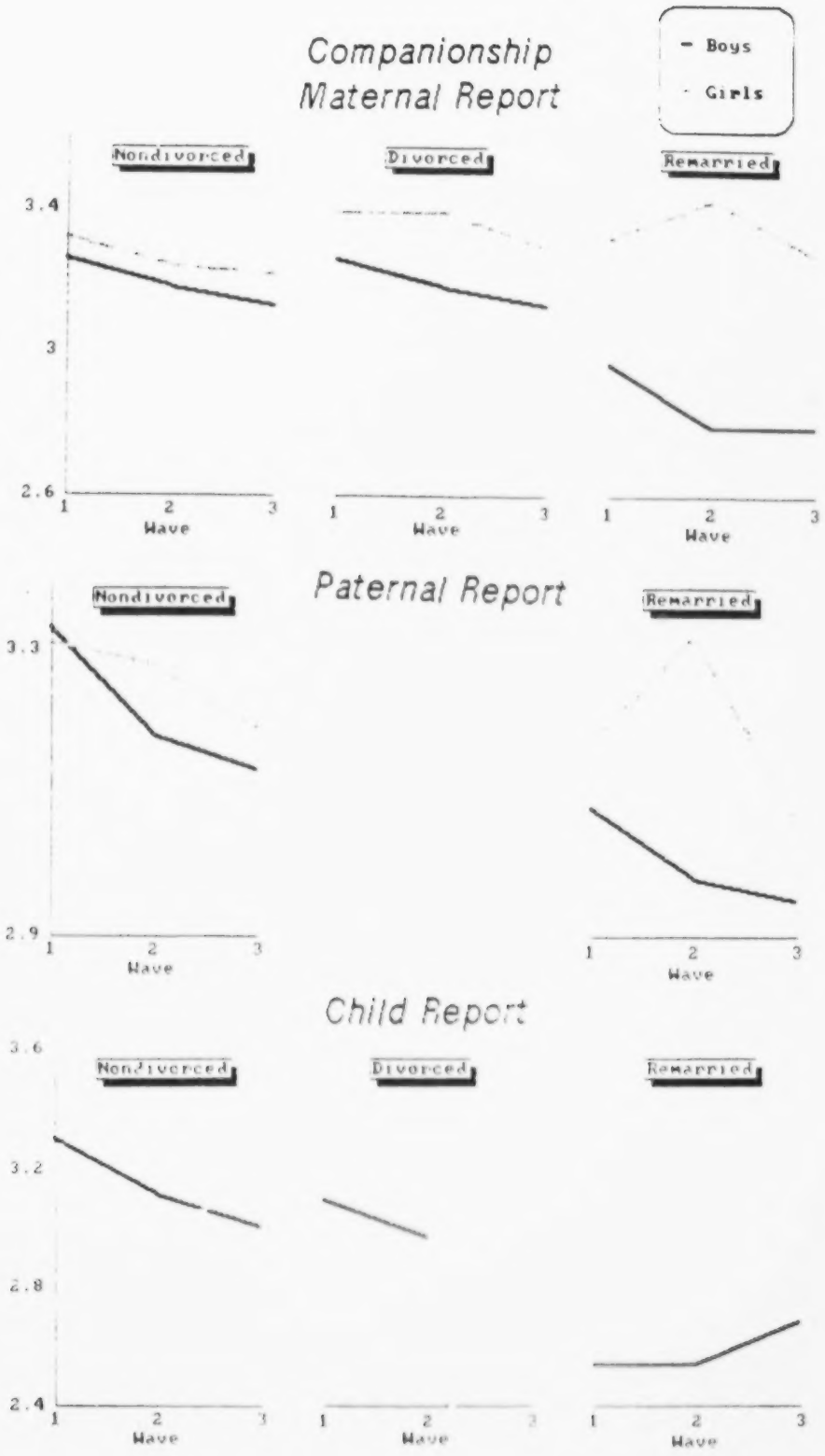

Maternal Report
Boys
Girls
Aggression
Nondivorced
Divorced
Remarried
3.7
3.5
3.3
3.1
2.9
2.7
1
2
3
Wave
Rivalry
3.6
3.4
3.2
3
2.8
2.6
2.4

Sibling Empathy
Maternal Report

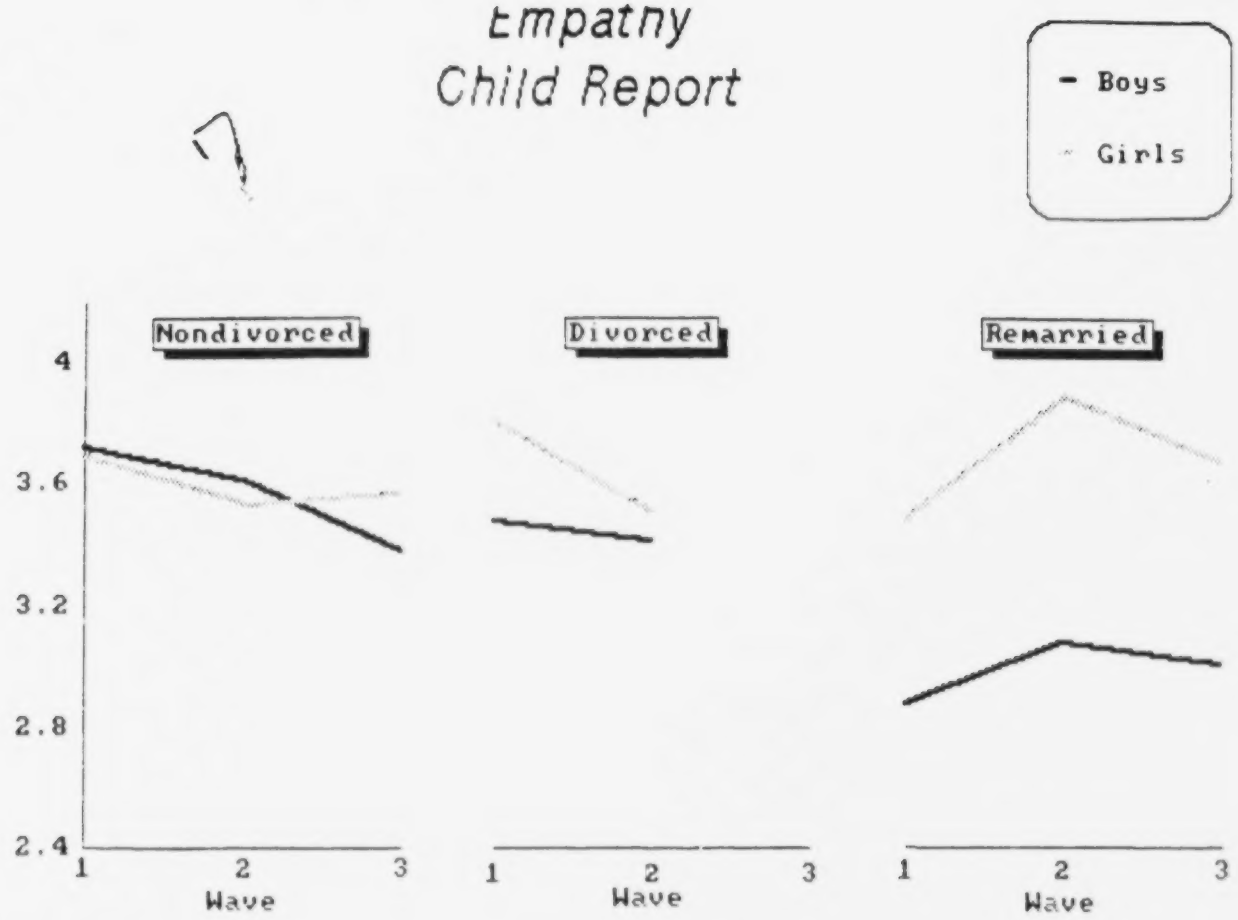


Companionship

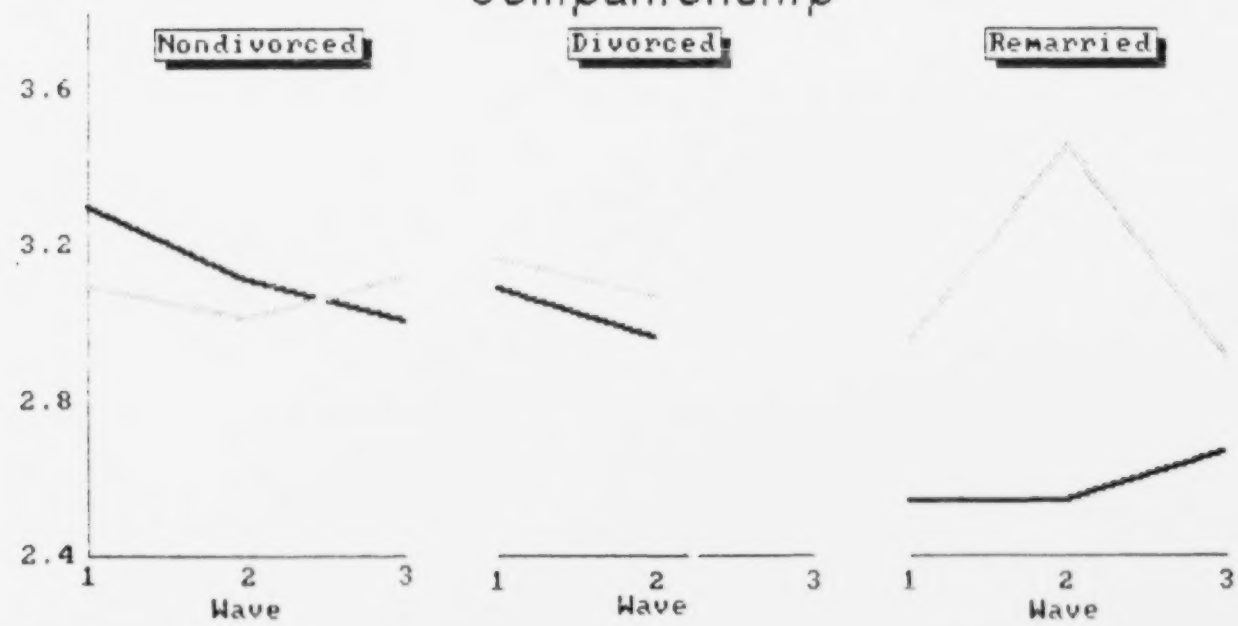


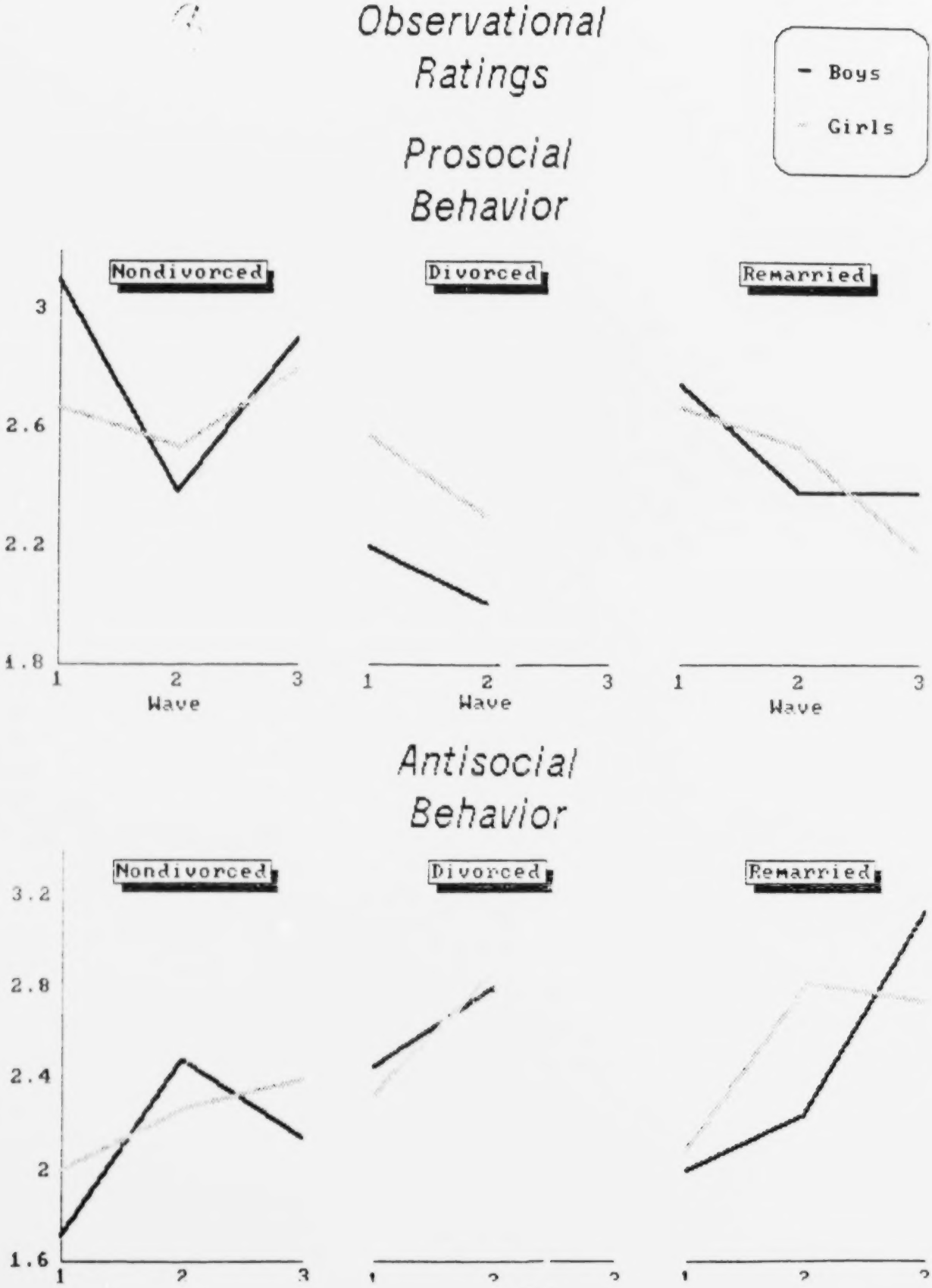

Companionship
Maternal Report
Boys
Girls
Nondivorced
Divorced
Remarried
3.4
3
2.6
1
2
3
Wave
Paternal Report
3.3
2.9
Child Report
3.6
3.2
2.8
2.4

Empathy
Child Report

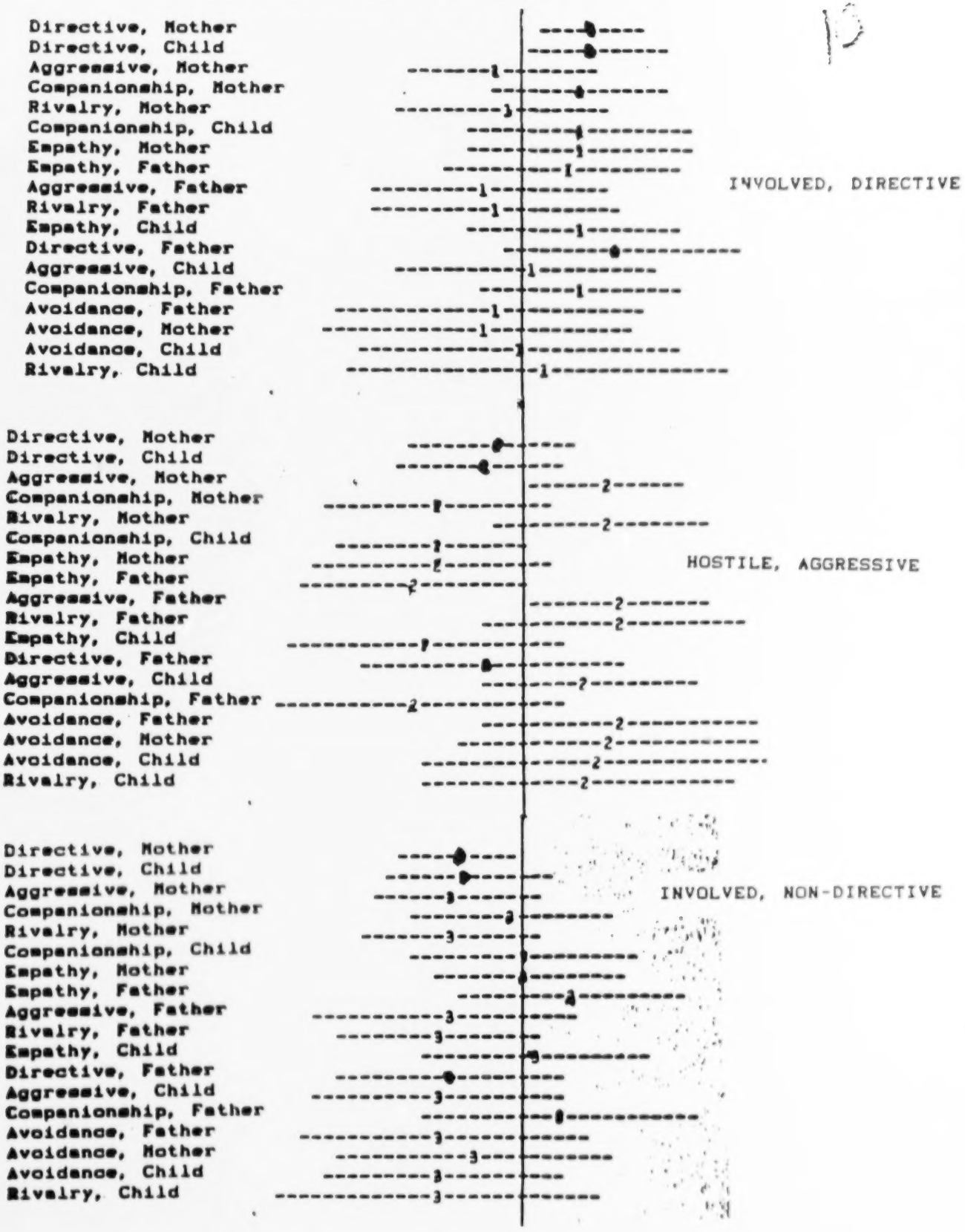


Companionship

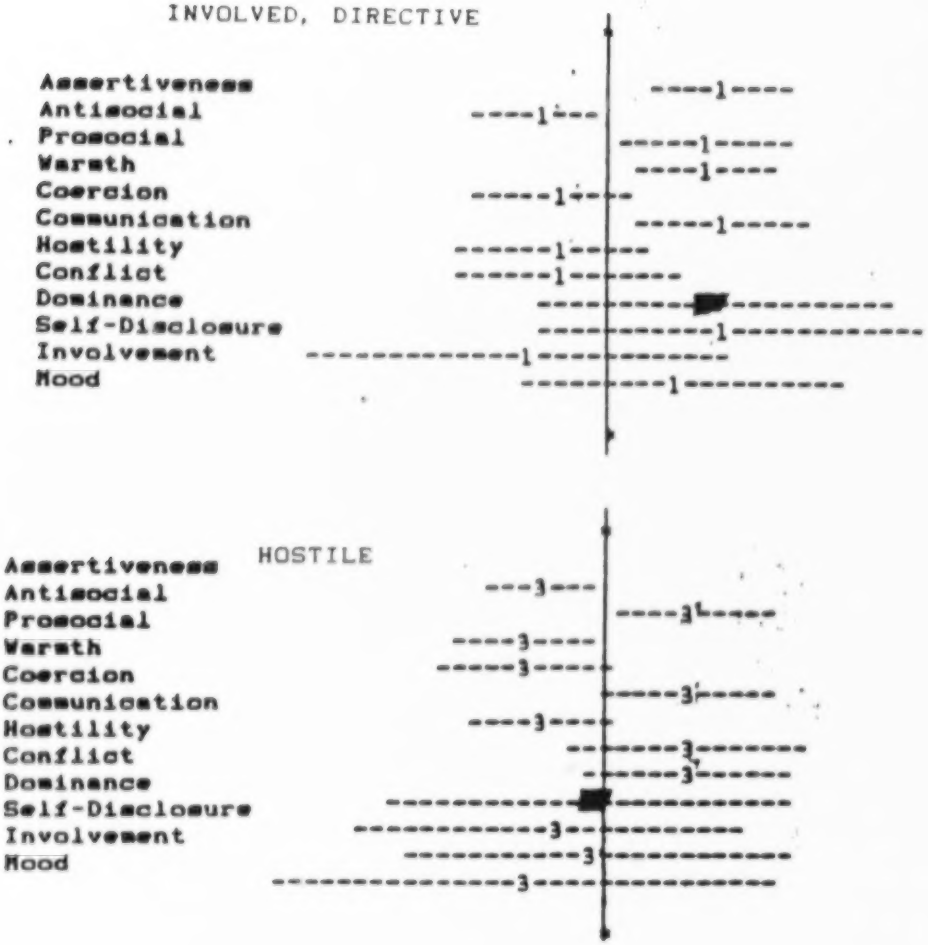



Observational Ratings
Boys
Girls
Prosocial Behavior
Nondivorced
Divorced
Remarried
3
2.6
2.2
1.8
1
2
3
Wave
Antisocial Behavior
3.2
2.8
2.4
2
1.6

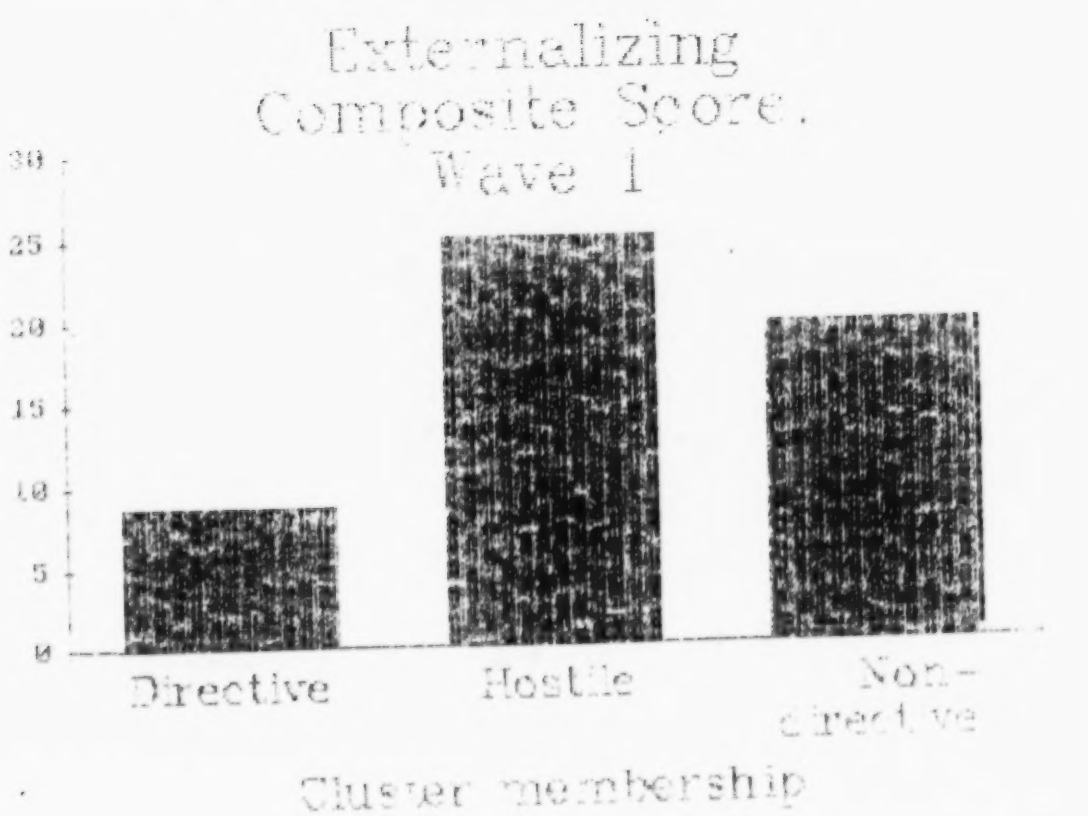
Cluster means obtained for INTERVIEW data

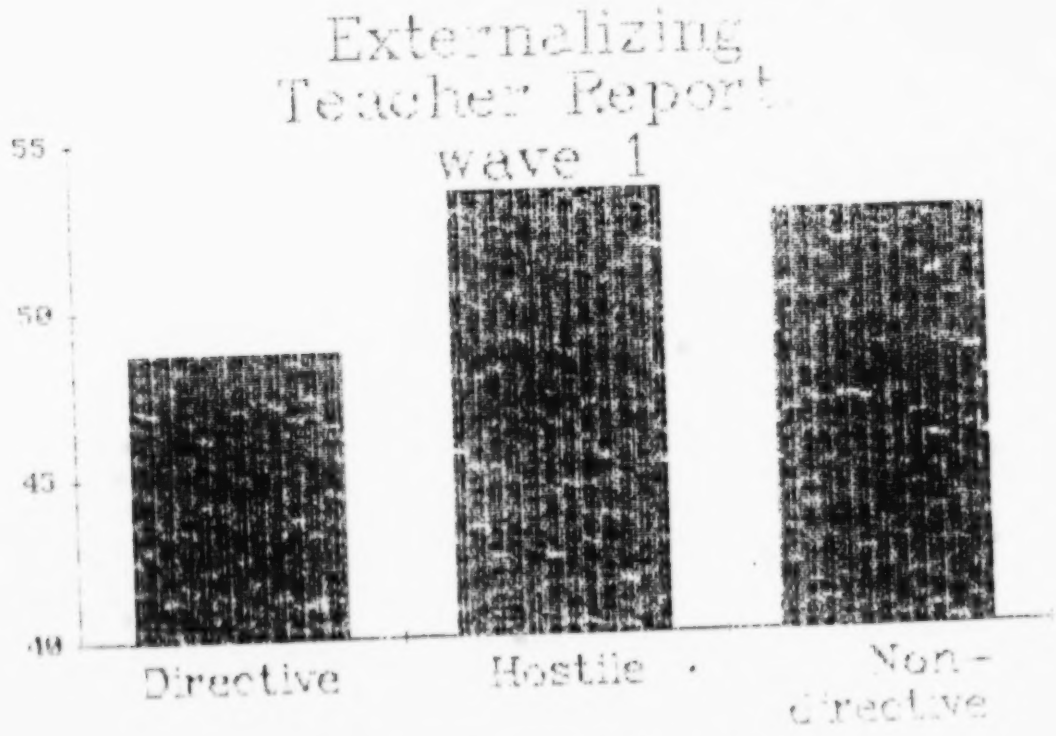


Cluster means obtained for OBSERVATIONAL data



EACH COLUMN DESCRIBES A CLUSTER .
THE CLUSTER NUMBER IS PRINTED AT THE MEAN OF EACH VARIABLE
DASHES INDICATE ONE STANDARD DEVIATION ABOVE AND BELOW


Externalizing
Composite Score.
Wave 1
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Directive
Hostile
Non-
directive
Cluster membership


Externalizing
Teacher Report
wave 1
55
50
45
40
Directive
Hostile
Non-
directive
Cluster membership

NUMBER OF CHILDREN CLASSIFIED BY CLUSTER MEMBERSHIP
AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY STATUS AND GENDER

	NONDIVORCED		DIVORCED		REMARRIED	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
WAVE ONE						
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	13	10	4	13	2	3
HOSTILE	7	10	7	9	10	12
NON-DIRECTIVE	13	12	12	6	6	5
WAVE TWO						
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	10	11	8	14	1	7
HOSTILE	10	8	6	6	9	4
NON-DIRECTIVE	12	12	9	6	5	4
WAVE THREE						
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	8	13			3	2
HOSTILE	10	7			6	8
NON-DIRECTIVE	12	8			3	4

NUMBER OF CHILDREN CLASSIFIED BY CLUSTER MEMBERSHIP
AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY STATUS AND GENDER

	NONDIVORCED			DIVORCED			REMARRIED		
	CHILD YOUNGER	EQUAL	CHILD OLDER	CHILD YOUNGER	EQUAL	CHILD OLDER	CHILD YOUNGER	EQUAL	CHILD OLDER
WAVE ONE									
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	3	3	17	2	5	10	0	2	3
HOSTILE	5	4	8	4	5	7	5	12	5
NON-DIRECTIVE	11	9	5	5	7	6	5	2	4
WAVE TWO									
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	0	4	17	0	6	16	1	2	5
HOSTILE	5	3	10	5	4	3	3	4	6
NON-DIRECTIVE	13	9	2	6	6	3	4	5	0
WAVE THREE									
INVOLVED-DIRECTIVE	2	3	16				0	1	4
HOSTILE	4	5	8				2	5	7
NON-DIRECTIVE	11	7	2				5	2	0

NOTE:

CHILD YOUNGER THAN TARGET SIBLING BY GREATER THAN 2 YEARS
CHILD WITHIN 2 YEARS OF TARGET SIBLING
CHILD OLDER THAN TARGET SIBLING BY GREATER THAN 2 YEARS